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AUTHOR Taylor, April Z.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated African American adolescents' achievement values. One hundred and forty-six male and 161 female African American sixth graders at a middle school in the Los Angeles (California) area nominated classmates according to 3 criteria: those whom they most admired, respected, and wanted to be like. These nominations were combined to create a "value" index. In addition, students nominated classmates who worked hard, "goofed off," followed school rules, and did not follow school rules. Teachers rated each participating student's academic achievement on a nine-point scale. There were gender differences. Girls "valued" high-achieving girls more than medium and low-achieving girls. Boys, on the other hand, valued low and medium achieving boys more than high-achieving boys. This study begins to address the lack of research on achievement values, particularly among African American adolescents. (Contains one table, three figures, and six references.) (Author/SLD)

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Running head: ACHIEVEMENT VALUES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

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Working Hard or Hardly Working?
An Exploration of the Achievement Values of African American Youth

April Z. Taylor
University of California, Los Angeles

Karen P. Lysaght
University of Auckland, New Zealand

Sandra Graham
University of California, Los Angeles

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Address Correspondence to:
April Z. Taylor
Graduate School of Education and Information Studies
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521

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Abstract

This study investigated African American adolescents' achievement values. One hundred and forty-six male and 161 female African American 6th graders nominated classmates along three criteria: those who they most admired, respected, and wanted to be like. These nominations were combined to create a "value" index. In addition, students nominated classmates who worked hard, goofed off, followed school rules, and didn't follow school rules. Teachers rated each participating student's academic achievement on a 9-point scale. Gender differences showed that girls "valued" high achieving girls more than medium and low achieving girls. Boys on the other hand valued low and medium achieving boys more than high achieving boys. This study begins to address the lack of research on achievement values, particularly among African American adolescents.

Working Hard or Hardly Working? An Exploration of the Achievement Values of African American Youth

A great deal of research in motivation shows that children who believe that achievement is due to effort are more likely to persist after failure than those who believe that achievement is determined by natural ability (Elliot & Dweck,1988; Nicholls,1984). Attribution theory can account for this phenomenon by analyzing the causal dimensions that differentiate effort and ability. According to attribution theory, effort is unstable and controllable. Ability on the other hand, is stable and uncontrollable. This means that effort is perceived as being modifiable and subject to volitional influence (i.e. you can try harder next time), whereas ability is perceived as being chronic and not subject to volitional influence (i.e. you are either able or unable to achieve). It therefore seems reasonable that children who value effort and recognize its importance are more likely to do well in school, compared to those who consider ability to be the major factor in determining achievement.

Because effort is a key variable in achievement contexts, some researchers have suggested that one explanation for poor school performance among African American children is that they do not value effort and working hard. For example, Steinberg, Dornbusch and Brown (1992) argued that perceived barriers to mobility are so great that African American youth may not recognize effort-outcome covariation.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggested that African American students have developed an opposition to activities that are

considered to be the domain of White Americans. That refers to areas that have historically been promoted as dominated by, and in which judgments of performance were made by, whites using white standards. One such area is academics. High achievement and working hard, elements relating to academic success, may be associated with "acting white" and therefore may be devalued among African American youth, particularly adolescents.

While this notion of African American youth devaluing effort has much popular appeal, as yet there is relatively little empirical research on the topic. Even fewer studies address what African American children do value, be that achievement or otherwise. This is consistent with general research in motivation which has tended to neglect the study of values (Wigfield & Eccles, 1994).

The study reported here begins to address the lack of research on achievement values, particularly among African American adolescents, by examining whether achievement and hard work are indeed devalued by this population and if so, what is valued instead. In devising a methodology that minimized social desirability, sociometric procedures where children nominated classmates they respected, admired, and wanted to be like, as well as who fit the descriptions of working hard and getting good grades, goofing off and not getting good grades, following school rules, and not following school rules, were utilized. In this way information was gathered regarding not only the characteristics of those who were nominated, but also the characteristics of the nominator. The interest was in exploring the relationships between students' achievement levels and characteristics suggesting effort or a lack of effort in academics.

Additionally, the characteristics that are "valued" by African American adolescents were of particular interest. The interest was in looking at the characteristics of those peers that students nominate as admiring, respecting, and wanting to be like, in terms of their gender and achievement level.

Method

Participants

Participants were 146 male and 161 female African American sixth grade students attending a predominantly Black (99%) middle school in the Los Angeles area. Parent permission forms describing the study were sent home with each child. Only students who returned signed consent forms participated in the study.

Materials

Materials used included a 9-point Likert type achievement rating scale for each teacher (1=very low achievement, 9=very high achievement), and a sociometric rating form with appropriate class list for each student. There were seven sociometric questions. Children were first asked to nominate the three classmates who they most admired; most respected; and most wanted to be like. The rationale for these questions was that identifying the characteristics of individuals whom an adolescent admires, respects, and wants to be like, would indicate the characteristics they value.

Following these questions, participants were also asked to nominate three students who: (1) work hard and get good grades; (2) "goof off" and don't get good grades; (3) follow school rules; and

(4) don't follow school rules. Asking these additional questions allowed an examination of the relationship between being nominated as admired or respected, and other characteristics such as trying hard or not trying hard.

Procedure

In the homerooms, teachers reported each student's achievement level while the students completed sociometric questionnaires. Sociometric procedures were conducted by three African American and one Caucasian female working in pairs.

With the aid of a class list, each student privately completed their sociometric questionnaire. Participants assembled books around their working space so that their responses could not be seen by their neighbors. In addition, participants were urged not to discuss their responses with anyone. After the peer nominations were completed students participated in a competitive, timed word game for which each student received a prize. This was included as a distracter. The procedure lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Results

Correlations

Initial analyses showed that admiration, be like, and respect nominations were highly correlated (see Table 1). Thus, the more nominations a student had for being admired, the more he or she also had for being respected and chosen as someone others wanted to be like. The average correlation between these measures was .70. There was a positive correlation between being admired, respected,

and wanted to be like, and being nominated as working hard and getting good grades (average r=.57), and following school rules (average r=.41). These positive value nominations were either unrelated to, or negatively correlated with, characteristics such as goofing off and not getting good grades (average r= -.09), and not following school rules (average r= .07).

Table 1

Correlations Between Variables in the Sociometric Task (N=304)

	Admire	Respect	BeLike	Effort	Rules	NoEffort
Admire						
Respect	.73**					
Be Like	.74**	.64**				
Effort	.60**	.61**	.50**			
Rules	.39**	.51**	.33**	.78**		
No Effort	-.11	-.14*	-.05	.24**	-.25**	
No Rules	-.07	-.12*	-.02	-.23**	-.26**	.91**

*$p < .05$ **$p < .001$

Frequencies

Students were divided into high, medium, or low achievement groups according to their achievement ratings as reported by their teacher. Combining the admire, respect and want to be like nominations into one "value" index, we first examined the relationship between being nominated and students' achievement levels (see Figure 1). There was a significant effect for nominee

achievement level $\chi^2(2, N = 1768) = 139.46, p < .001$. Both high achievers $\chi^2(1, N = 1094) = 130.6, p < .001$, and medium achievers $\chi^2(1, N = 1032) = 96.76, p < .001$ were more frequently nominated than low achievers. There was no difference between high and medium achievers in the frequency of being nominated.

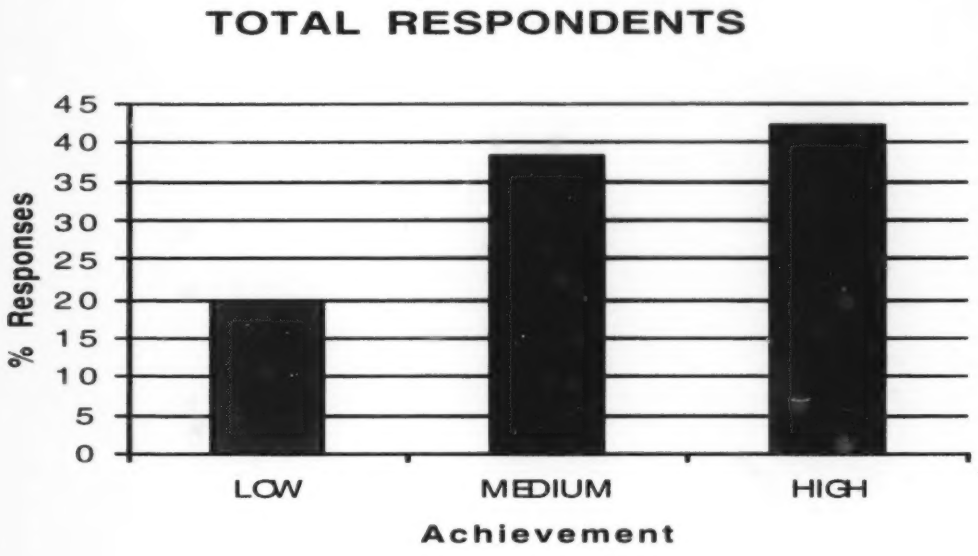

Figure 1. Percentage of nominations for low, medium, and high achievers.

Subsequently, the relationship between being nominated and achievement level was further examined according to the gender of both the respondent and the nominee. Female respondents' nominations of other females increased significantly with the achievement level of the nominee $\chi^2(2, N = 902) = 179.93, p < .001$. Figure 2 shows that female respondents were most likely to nominate other females (92%), particularly high achieving females

(46%), and were unlikely to nominate males regardless of their achievement level (8%). Females nominated significantly more higher achieving females than both medium $\chi^2(1, N = 777) = 20.10, p < .001$, and low achieving females $\chi^2(1, N = 576) = 184.50, p < .001$. There was a significant difference between medium and low achievers $\chi^2(1, N = 451) = 89.58, p < .001$, with females nominating more medium achieving females than low achieving females.

Males were also more likely to nominate other males (70%), however they were least likely to nominate a high achieving male (17%) (see Figure 3). High achieving males were selected significantly less than both medium $\chi^2(1, N = 352) = 23.02, p < .001$, and low $\chi^2(1, N = 326) = 12.56, p < .001$ achieving males. When nominating females, males were least likely to nominate low achieving females (2%). Low achieving females were selected significantly less than both high $\chi^2(1, N = 138) = 94.18, p < .001$, and medium $\chi^2(1, N = 118) = 74.88, p < .001$ achieving females, but there was no significant difference in males' nominations of medium and high achieving females.

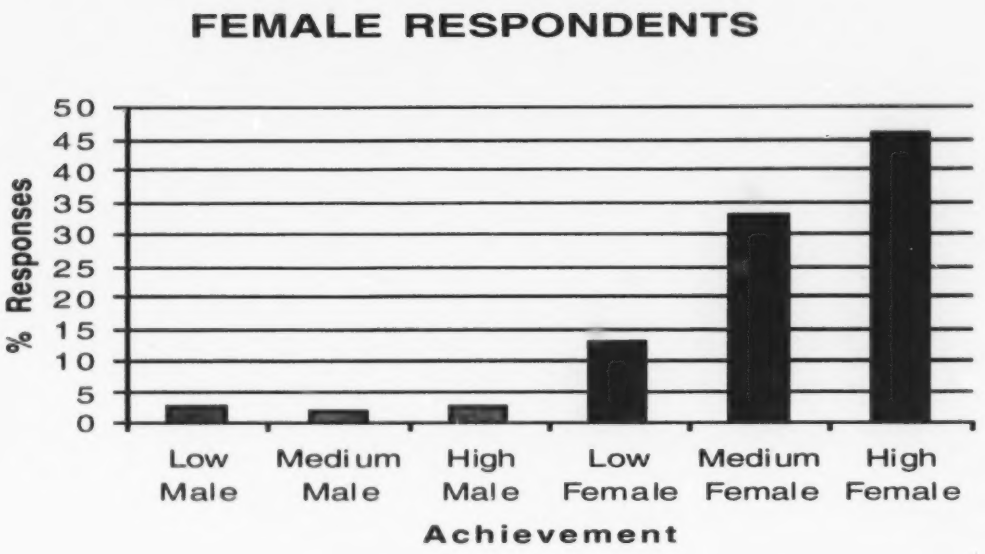

Figure 2. Percentage of female respondents' nominations by gender and achievement level.

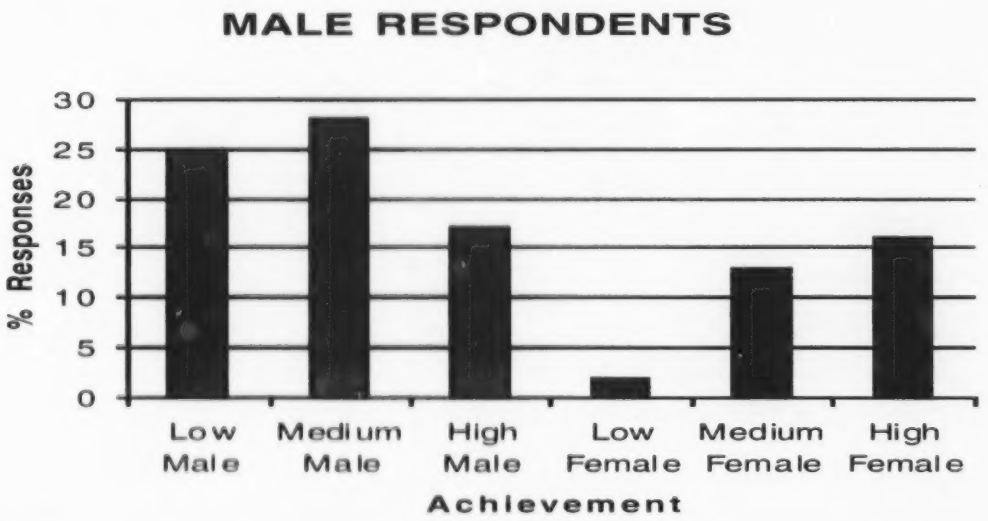

Figure 3. Percentage of male respondents' nominations by gender and achievement level.

Discussion

The primary aim of the study was to explore the value systems of African American adolescents in terms of what achievement levels are admired in their male and female peers. The findings challenge the notion that African American adolescents do no value effort and achievement, but suggest that African American males and females differ in the achievement characteristics that they value. Females valuing of other females increased significantly with achievement level of the nominee. Females nominations of males however, did not differ with males' achievement levels, in fact, they were unlikely to nominate a male regardless of whether they were a high or low achiever. Males' pattern of nominating on the other hand, differed depending on the gender of the nominee. When nominating girls, males, like females, were more likely to nominate high achievers. When nominating boys however, males tended to nominate low and medium achieving boys. These results may raise some concern for African American males' achievement values. The findings suggest that males do not value achievement. There are however several possible explanations for the findings. The age group examined uncovers both an explanation and limitation of the study. The suggestion that boys do not value high achievers, these being students who try hard and get good grades and follow school rules, may simply be a reflection of the values of all males at this age, regardless of their ethnicity. It may be the case that preadolescent males rebel against authority and social expectations during this stage of development (Moffitt, 1993). If this is the case, one

manifestation of this rebellion is likely to be a lack of effort in school and therefore a devaluing of those that do achieve in school.

However, it is important to note that this devaluing of achievers is gender specific. Males did value high achievement in females. It may be the case that doing well is perceived as a feminine quality, and therefore a characteristic acceptable for girls, but not boys. This may leave males to seek success in more "masculine" activities such as disobeying school rules. There may also be peer pressure on boys to conform to the norm and hence do poorly in school and devalue effort and high achievement. Alternatively, if males are performing poorly in school, this tendency to value non achieving males may simply be a reflection of their valuing of others like themselves.

This assumes that by nominating low achievers, boys devalue effort and achievement. However, these nominations may indicate the valuing of characteristics other than low achievement, such as, personality characteristics and athletic ability, that have not been identified by the study. This may also apply to girls nominations. While it appears that by nominating high achieving females, girls are valuing this quality, it may be the case that high achieving girls share other characteristics.

The question of whether the gender differences found here are specific to African American males or whether there is a general devaluing of effort among boys relative to girls during adolescence, demonstrates the need for further studies on values. Future studies should examine these possibilities as well as the relationship of age, ethnicity, achievement, and other value characteristics.

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